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Wordsworth, the Railway and “the riot of the town”

The majority of texts written as a part of the anti-railway campaign in the 19th century tendered graphic images of the destruction of the landscape, either accomplished or anticipated, wrecked in the name of technological advancement. Sundry opponents of the railway would therefore bring to focus the trail of marked change and irreparable damage left by the railway in its relentless progress, and in so doing depict the technological triumph as a procession of spoils. Such is the tenor of a Mr Bell’s vision:

The whole country from coast to coast was to be traversed and dissected by iron roads. Wherever there was a hamlet or a cattle track, a market or a manufactory, there was to be a railroad; physical objects and private rights were straws under the chariot wheels of the Fire King. Mountains were to be cut through; valleys were to be lifted; the skies were to be scaled; the earth was to be tunnelled; parks, gardens, and ornamental grounds were to be broken into ... (Francis, 147)

Typically, Bell brings into play all the stock elements and tactics of the anti-railway offensive as he reconstructs the principal anxieties engendered by the imminent introduction of technology into the countryside. The focus is on violence: a disruption of the organic fabric required to sculpt the requisite topography. Through exploits of engineering as violent as they are awesome nature is to be shaped anew to yield to the demands of the machine.

The laying down of the iron track across the countryside, whereby the face of the land acquired new indelible lines, was inevitably compared to a radical surgical operation: the land was “dissected,” as Bell put it, or “cut up” as Lady Dunstane phrases it in *Diana of the Crossways*: “this mania for cutting up the land does really cause me to pity those who are to follow us. They will not see the England we have seen. It will be patched and scored, disfigured ... a sort of barbarous Maori visage – England in a New Zealand mask” (Meredith, 51). Here the diatribe against the railway includes, inevitably, a lament for the loss of the beautiful face of the countryside, not long before improved by landscape artists, the spectacular effects of whose long-term work could be appreciated at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Now alien industrial features, together with the new demarcation lines redrafting the boundaries of private property, mutilate the beauty and integrity of the land, but worse still give it a foul aspect of regression. It is the pre-industrial, though not entirely natural, landscape that betokens the civilised England. Once branded by the railway, the territory surrenders its Englishness to lapse into a savage condition. Proof against external forces, England becomes ravaged from within in an insidious act of vandalism and self-mutilation. It is a colonisation from within as well as a colonisation *à rebours* in that England, “our dear England” (Meredith, 51), criss-crossed by the tracks, adopts a barbarous appearance of the people it elsewhere subjugated. Progress bears a savage face.

Still, the destruction of the countryside turns out to be performed less for the sake of the railway, which is just a means, and more for the sake of the remote town. Bell’s vision incorporates also such scenes:

the shrieking engine was to carry the riot of the town into the sylvan retreats of pastoral life; sweltering trains were to penetrate solitudes hitherto sacred to the ruins of antiquity; hissing locomotives were to rush over the tops of houses. (147)

Thus to yield to the train really means to yield to the town, and, obviously, the distance annihilated with the help of new technology is

that between the country and the town. The railway heralds the extension of urban ways, the expansion of oppressiveness, noise, disorder, and ugliness. As more and more of the land is reticulated with tracks, permanent connections between the country and the town are forged, and so contract the rural ground and rustic integrity. The town conquers the countryside; the machine breaks into the garden.¹

The theme of the incursion of technology into nature can be seen as a development of the commonplace literary practice of contrasting the town and the country. Yet, with the appearance of the railway, all comparisons of the two locations and the modes of living pertinent to them have to acknowledge the dissolution of the spatial distance which hitherto kept the two worlds apart. Before the machine age the distance helped stave off urban culture, together with all its complexities and complications. It was a reassuring border since not too hermetic enough to preclude, yet not too easily or commonly crossed and thus sufficiently secure to make these realities distinctly separate.

The railway opens this border by closing the distance. Though the physical distance does not shrink to nothingness (it has a solid representation in the form of the track and the regular appearance of the train), it no longer remains in the service of the difference: rather than separate, it connects; rather than isolate, it integrates, which some find an agreeable and others a precarious phenomenon. Still, as the distance between the country and the town is travelled, the journey initiated by technology seems to remain very much a one-way journey. It is the town that travels in the direction of the country, and once it arrives it does so to imprint the marks of its order on rural space. Technology serves urban forces but, as Leo Marx says, "technological power ... does not remain confined to the traditional boundaries of the city" (Marx, 32). The train, an unmistakable envoy of urban order, comes and goes, but however rapid the actual passage of the train through the countryside might be, it can hardly be considered in terms of transience. Rather, the train signifies an implacable mobility: it disappears from sight only to threaten

¹ *The Machine in the Garden* is the title and the subject of the classical study of Leo Marx.

a regular return. After all, the conquered territory is permanently marked, the inroads which technology made into the country are too deep, the changes too far-reaching: mountains were cut through, valleys lifted, the earth tunnelled; the operations undertaken were too extravagant to make the presence of the machine in the rural surroundings an inconsequential episode.

In the anti-railway writings, obviously, sympathy goes out to the country enclosed within the sentimental paradigm of serenity and seclusion. Lady Dunstane joins her rant against the railway with the lament for "quiet, rural England," "beauty [and] ... simplicity" (Meredith, 51). The train which carries, in Bell's words, "the riot of the town into the sylvan retreats of pastoral life" upsets this Arcadian harmony with its ugly intrusion into the tranquil landscape. What the railway imports into the appropriated land is the intimidating physicality of technology as new discordant sights and sounds penetrate the place: "the shrieking engine," "sweltering trains," "hissing locomotives." Meredith, too, makes Lady Dunstane rehearse all the hackneyed fears: "the whistle in the night beneath one's windows, and the smoke of trains defacing the landscape; hideous accidents" but above all "noise and hubbub," "hisses, shrieks, puffings and screeches" (Meredith, 51). It is the shriek of the machine that best illustrates the idea of "the interrupted idyll" (27), to refer to Leo Marx again, a triumphant as much as ominous call of technology which breaks the tranquillity of the countryside and annexes it to the urban domain. Thus the shock experienced at hearing the shrill noise is, in fact, a shock at the alarming proximity of the town. The "shrieking engine," "sweltering trains," "hissing locomotives" are abhorrent in themselves, but the real revulsion relates to the invasion of urban manners and morals as "the refuse of the town [keeps] flooding the land" (Meredith, 51). What Bell, similarly, calls "the riot of the town" means a noise not merely louder or more lasting but also far more deleterious than that of the machine.

It is exactly the fear of "the riot of the town" that motivated William Wordsworth's well-known protests against the projected branch line in his beloved Lake District. In a letter to William Gladstone, published in the *Morning Post*, he wrote:

We are in this neighbourhood all in consternation, that is every man of taste and feeling, at the stir which is made for carrying a branch Railway from Kendal to the head of Windermere. When the subject comes before you officially, ... pray give it more attention than its apparent importance may call for. In fact, the project if carried into effect will destroy the staple of the Country which is its beauty, and on the Lord's day particularly, will prove subversive of its quiet, and be highly injurious to its morals. (Legg, 59)

At the heart of his concern is then the disruption of the peace of the place by the uncouth crowd whose members are not men "of taste and feeling." Of not refined sentiments and aesthetically uneducated, common – that is to say working-class – visitors could scarcely appreciate the beauty of the spot. Wordsworth positions himself as a spokesman for the local community, but, more accurately, he writes on behalf of persons of the aristocratic turn of mind, in defence of the place as well as in defence of his own exquisite sensibility, so as to mark his and his likes', separateness from the insensitive and unimaginative crowds.

To admit coarse spectators into the Lake District makes little sense since the charm of the landscape cannot but be lost on them. But, of course, that charm will have already been impaired and unfit for contemplation through the very presence of both railway constructions and crowds pouring out of the train to view the scenery, to whose loveliness contributes, amongst other things, its sequestered character. Beauty is conditioned by seclusion. Not only does Wordsworth assume that urban crowds lack aesthetic expertise to do justice to the surroundings, but he even harbours a suspicion that the rabble may have little, if not none, admiration for the scenery and treat it indifferently or, worse still, make it a backdrop to vulgar forms of leisure. The idea behind going out of town, William Hazlitt once argued, is "to forget the town and all that is in it" and not to "carry the metropolis" (141) and the noise of others with one; but what may be possible for an individual (for Hazlitt a journey into the countryside was a pleasant experience, provided one went by oneself), is unworkable in the case of a mass excursion. By definition a noisy and rough body, the populace can have no ear for silence. As Tadeusz Rachwał writes, since "artisan minds are ... disposed to unrest rather than to peace ... they should spend their leisure

in equally 'unrestful' places" (91). Without a doubt, the city is one such unrestful place, replete with loud and rowdy amusements, so vividly represented in Book VII of *The Prelude*, and it is to them that Wordsworth angrily orders the common travellers out of the Lake District:

Go to a pantomime, a farce, or a puppet-show, if you want noisy pleasure – the crowd of spectators who partake your enjoyment will, by their presence and acclamations, enhance it; but may those who have given proof that they prefer other gratifications continue to be safe from the molestation of cheap trains pouring out their hundreds at a time along the margin of Windermere. (154)

Wordsworth reinforces his argument by alluding to the then popular sabbatarian campaign and, even though he does not amplify this particular issue, he sets in motion a convoy of moral reservations that Sabbath travelling provoked. On the one hand, the excursion train was doing good since it took the urban throng to "the green fields, the smokeless heavens, and the fresh free beauties of Nature" (Pimlott, 91), but, on the other, in so doing it took this very crowd away from religious service. Arguments for excursion traffic would highlight the salutary value of Sunday escapades allowing the labouring classes to recoup their energy in the wholesome environment, and so work more efficiently. And while nature betokens here restorative freshness and health, unavailable in busy towns, it has another economic merit: its medicinal and aesthetic attractions are free. Nature thus, and therefore the Sunday train – the latter, admittedly, not free – entailed a thrifty and hygienic use of leisure. Deprived of a cheap opportunity to break away from the urban confinement, the working classes, it was argued, could yield, as many of them had done before, to gross and debilitating pleasures such as beer or gin drinking, prize fights or betting (Pimlott, 85). Compared to these, a train excursion to the countryside was a civilised and civilising activity.

Yet while proper observance of Sunday required it should be a day of respectable rest, it – more importantly – meant that the day should be honoured by going to church. Thus if the railway was a means of

saving the populace from sin by leading it away from ignoble temptations, it itself was a means to distraction removing city-dwellers from their religious duties. That Sunday trains decimated congregations was not an infrequent complaint expressed by clergymen, although much exaggerated and unfair: church-attendance did not plummet down on the introduction of Sunday railway service, not just because most railway companies made a concession to the Sabbath by providing either the so called "church interval" – the discontinuation of service from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. – or a less frequent operation of trains.

While Wordsworth hints at the Sunday issue, his concern about irreverence involving the urban masses does not inhere in their railway-induced failure to go to church, but in the far more reprehensible desecration of nature's peace. It would also be a desecration of his privacy and solitude that condition his own spiritual communion with the surroundings. Brought to the serene area by excursion trains, "large bodies" of "uneducated persons" (Wordsworth, 152) could not but disturb it with ugly clamour, a natural corollary of their uneducatedness and largeness. The assault on nature of which Wordsworth writes is not attributed only to the machine: he makes little of technological noises; the evil of the railway's intrusion in the district would be "its scarifications, its intersections, its noisy machinery, its smoke, and swarms of pleasure-hunters, most of them thinking that they do not fly fast enough through the country which they have come to see" (152). This anxiety echoes that interwoven in Bell's vision of "the shrieking engine [that] was to carry the riot of the town into the sylvan retreats of pastoral life" or anticipates Meredith's Lady Dunstane's apprehension that the quiet, beauty and simplicity of rural England "will be destroyed by the refuse of the town flooding the land" (Meredith, 51). What links the three visions of the railway's invasion of the countryside is the way in which they all identify the train with the town, and the noise of the engine with that of the mob.

Thus the disruption proper would come from the noisy common crowd deposited by the train in the once quiet locality. Such an invasion of nature would be no different from profaning a house of worship by loud and disorderly behaviour; Wordsworth's belief is that one must observe the stillness of nature with a reverence due to a divinity. Nature

is a place and object of worship: "Sacred as a relic of the devotion of our ancestors deserves to be kept, there are temples of Nature, temples built by the Almighty, which have still higher claim to be left un-violated" (162). Parties of uncouth Sunday visitors blighting the place would perpetrate an act of desecration all the more heinous because happening on the Lord's Day. It would be a more sacrilegious act also since, as Wordsworth insists, temples of nature, unlike, say, urban churches, are more evidently the work of God, whereby the protection of their inviolability should be everyone's moral duty.

Although Wordsworth professes to speak, as it were, on nature's behalf, protecting 'temples of nature' for nature's sake, the cause he so fervently champions is not entirely altruistic. Defending the cause, he has to take care to simultaneously defend himself against the accusation "of having written from any selfish interests, or from fear of disturbance which a railway might cause to [himself]" (165). For one thing he claims his age – 74 at the time – to be an argument against his selfish motivation, yet it is for his own seclusion, as much as that of the Lake District, that he fears. One consequence of the construction of the railway line between Kendal and Windermere would be that

Schemes of retirement sown
In youth, and 'mid the busy world kept pure
As when their earliest flowers of hope were blown,
Must perish; – how can they this blight endure? (146)

The expected frustration of the "schemes of retirement" which comforted one when still besieged by "the busy world" puts one in mind of Oliver Goldsmith's *Deserted Village*, which, similarly, touches on the once entertained hopes of a happy withdrawal into the countryside. For both poets it means a retreat into a desired reality and such values as it embodies as well as, if not more, a retreat from "civilisation's growing power and complexity" (Marx, 9). However for Goldsmith the longed-for retirement away from the hectic or care-laden world was to be a retirement not so much into stillness and seclusion as into a perhaps less busy yet certainly communal life. If this scheme comes to grief, it does so for reasons different from those which threaten Wordsworth's retreat:

enclosures destroy Goldsmith's expectations because they result in waste and the depopulation of the village, producing thus seclusion that is too absolute and too contaminated by loss and decay to take pleasure in. In Goldsmith's view the pleasure of the countryside rests on a social experience, the withdrawal means joining in the village life, enjoying a gentle, low-key busyness of toil and leisure. As he constructs in the recollection of the pre-enclosure village the romance of the place, one of its most essential elements is its cheerful liveliness communicated by a variety of sounds. Of course, the noises with which the village reverberates are the sounds that Wordsworth could not think objectionable, let alone threatening, since they are all indigenous, ordinary, and natural: they belong to and are expressive of the location.

In an analogous manner then stillness intimates the character of the Lake District in which nature patronises silence and solitude: "The wide-spread waters of these regions are in their nature peaceful; so are the steep mountains and the rocky glens; nor can they be profitably enjoyed but by a mind disposed to peace" (Wordsworth, 154). It is also silence and solitude which give the area an essentially romantic quality; enjoining nature to "protest against the wrong" Wordsworth apostrophises the scenery in the Sonnet accompanying his letters as "thou beautiful romance of Nature" (146). But it takes a fine imagination to introduce the romance into the natural scenery and a cultured sensitivity to savour its tranquillity. Crowds are by definition antipathetic to the reflective or imaginative experience of the landscape, but *ignoramus* crowds even more so. This is what Joseph Heely, whose thoughts on visiting Leasowes Peter de Bolla quotes, discovered when trying to lose himself in the contemplation of a particular spot: "I believe every spectator who visits this inimitable cascade, quits it with the utmost regret: – for my own part, had I not been disturbed by one of those noisy, ridiculous parties, who come to view they know not what, I cannot tell when I should have been disposed to leave it" (106). Heely's irritation stems out of the disruption of his solitude by a noisy uninformed party too close behind whereby he loses his place as well as silence and solitude. To maintain or re-claim them he must move on and so experiences a minor displacement, by no means as serious as the eviction which Wordsworth feels he will have to face once the Ken-

dal and Windermere railway opens. Diverse circumstances and threats apart, both Heely and Wordsworth see or imagine themselves driven out not so much by numbers as by ignorance. For all his lament for the loss of solitude Heely would not mind, one may assume, a company of more sensitive or culturally aware spectators, such who, like him, quit the "inimitable cascade ... with the utmost regret." A polite company, however numerous, would never be a noisy crowd but rather a fraternity of silent spectators whose good taste prompts them all into the self-absorption of delight.

Not only does the enjoyment of nature require a superior taste, but this superior taste makes the appreciation of beautiful scenery a profitable experience. The contemplation of the exquisite landscape elevates the mind, but as Wordsworth never tires of pointing out, it is only select minds that can be exalted in the process. Thus, while contact with nature improves man, it properly improves those who are already improved – and live in the neighbourhood – and who already belong to the privileged, and already closed, category of a "man of taste and feeling." Those without this class are, in most instances, deemed beyond improvement, and so best suited to demotic pleasures, whereas the few who are acknowledged as improvable should seek the material for their improvement elsewhere, away from beautiful scenery. Aesthetic development cannot but be approved of, "more susceptible taste is undoubtedly a great acquisition," but "the question is, what means are most likely to be beneficial in extending this operation? Surely, that good is not to be obtained transferring at once uneducated persons in large bodies to particular spots" (Wordsworth, 152).

What invites disapproval then is the strategy proposed for educating taste, based on the fallacy that it boils down to a simple transport operation. As a result, aesthetic sensitivity becomes devalued in that the argumentation appended to the Kendal and Windermere Railway project implies that it can be acquired for a train fare and in very little time too. Yet such a belief bears the stamp of arrogant imposture. Nature, although apparently an egalitarian pleasure, calls, in fact, for the highest degree of connoisseurship. As Wordsworth argues, "the perception of what has acquired the name of picturesque and romantic scenery is so far from being intuitive, that it can be produced only by a slow and

gradual process of culture" (157). One cannot come to nature simply by train. The intuitive sense of beauty, which he would deny the populace anyway, does not suffice to experience it profoundly, and if not contemplated profoundly, nature should best be left alone. One cannot come to nature quickly either. The railway, whose construction, as its projectors argued, would help "to place the beauties of the Lake District within easier reach of these who cannot afford to pay for ordinary conveyances" (Wordsworth, 148), offers a presumptuous shortcut to nature to which one should arrive after a long and arduous progress that is through culture. Wordsworth seems to spare no effort to complicate the way to nature and thus save it from becoming a popular, simple and easy to both get to and perceive destination. If one mode of estranging and distancing nature is by keeping it off the railway track, another one is by placing the condition of prior aesthetic education as essential to its appropriate contemplation. Whichever approach, the objective remains to secure the seclusion and, what follows, exclusiveness of the scenery whose beauty and tranquillity deserve to be experienced by those alone who belong to the aesthetic, emotional and intellectual elite.

Those whose minds are of a more common cast can feed their eyes on a more ordinary nature. For Wordsworth insists on discriminating between two kinds of nature, each of which he reserves for the delectation of a different class of persons, thus projecting upon the appreciation of natural scenery a division similar to that practised also on the trains. "It is benignly ordained that green fields, clear blue skies, running streams of pure water, rich groves and woods, orchards, and all the ordinary varieties of rural nature, should find an easy way to the affections of all men" (151). Common nature commonly pleases. It is a universal approval that it enjoys, and though the intensity of this recognition may vary, still such a site of purity and plenty hardly arouses controversies as to its charm. For most people therefore "a rich meadow, with fat cattle grazing upon it, or the sight of ... a heavy crop of corn" (151) would make an aesthetically gratifying scene. But the sublimity afforded by the mountains draws no such common regard and for most eyes it would lose in comparison with a more domestic or ordinary landscape. Even among the accomplished travellers, Wordsworth observes, the enthu-

siasm for the Alps, Pyrenees or Lake District developed only recently and so in a less susceptible observer the generation of a taste for the sublime will not happen without a lengthy and slow process of training. The train bringing them all too easily to more staggering, and so aesthetically more complex, landscapes would be of service to some absurd acceleration. And while the railway may be invaluable in shortening all other times and distances and advancing the interests of trade, industry or agriculture, it cannot shorten the journey to the cultivated taste. Since "rocks and mountains, torrents and wide-spread waters cannot, in their finer relations to the human mind, be comprehended, or even very imperfectly conceived, without processes of culture or opportunities of observation in some degree habitual" (151), one may assume that the common persons first have to turn to other landscapes in order to exercise their powers of observation before they can attempt an initiation into superior scenes. Such a natural testing ground to which Wordsworth would rather dispatch them extends more closely to their homes and, by the same token, further from his home:

Instead of tempting artisans and labourers ... to ramble to a distance, let us rather look with lively sympathy upon persons in that condition, when upon a holiday, or on the Sunday, after having attended divine worship, they make little excursions with their wives and children among neighbouring fields, whither the whole of each family might stroll, or be conveyed at much less cost than would be required to take a single individual of the number to the shores of Windermere by the cheapest conveyance. It is in some such way as this only, that [they]... can be trained to a profitable intercourse with nature where she is the most distinguished by the majesty and sublimity of her forms. (152)

Once again in Wordsworth's argument the practical attitude mixes with the religious concern for, as he claims, the more immediate scenery can be enjoyed not only more cheaply and comfortably but also without deviating from the church routine. Perceived as instrumental to temptation, the train becomes here embroiled in devious, not to say devilish, practices from which only mischief can follow. While the advertised profit to be gained from the existence of train service to sites of beauty would belong to the uneducated classes brought to hitherto inaccessible

places, the actual and only profit such enterprises could bring would go into the pockets of the railway proprietors and shareholders. The ostensible educational and recreational objective of mass excursions into the regions of beauty which new railway lines would facilitate thinly disguises, Wordsworth indicates a less noble hope for large returns.

It is from all directions that he gathers, almost helter-skelter, reasons against the railway's presence in his corner of the Lake District. The fact that the projectors drew the "humbler ranks of society" (157) into their argumentation and so advertised themselves as the partisans of the poor and uneducated could not but have a disabling effect in that all opposition to the railway would be readily equated with the indifference, or even aversion, to the common crowd. While Wordsworth picks to pieces the project itself, he also finds fault with the conception of charity to which the plan of the Kendal and Windermere Railway gives a stimulus. For not only would the railway open up new, hitherto secluded, landscapes to the humble masses at an affordable charge, but it would launch further gestures of benevolence. One such patently charitable scheme concocted by manufacturers from nearby counties presupposed that they would send at their own expense their operatives on excursions to the Lake District. These mass railway expeditions represent just a perverted act of generosity in that they make the masters even more masterful by increasing their possession of workmen's time. Against its professed intentions, it ultimately demeans rather than benefits the poor: "packing off men after this fashion, for holiday entertainment, is ... treating them like children," Wordsworth remarks, adding "they go at the will of their master, and must return at the same, or they will be dealt with as transgressors" (159). The railway which facilitates such wholesale operations functions then as a means of coercion, enclosing within a rigid time-table the already prescribed and scripted leisure experience. What originates as a benign idea results in tightening the net of constraint. Although these organised expeditions to distant spots would have for their objective the development of the common mind, they would impose the conditions and direction in which this development should happen. It would be an operation not so different from the process of mass production in which, this time, similar "more comprehensive" tastes and sensibilities could be churned out.

As Wordsworth argues, excursion trains run counter to what he calls the “sense of personal independence” (159), which he grants – more generously than he would do sensibility – to Englishmen of all social classes. Counter to it runs however principally the doctrine of utilitarianism of which, he observes, railways are, unsurprisingly, “favourite instruments” (162) as this form of transport which deals in greatest numbers. In that vein, Walter Benjamin will later remark on “the historical significance of the railroad” as of “the first means of transport – and until, the big ocean liners, no doubt also the last – to form masses” (602). It is thus when in the service of utilitarian ideas, against which he mounts a brief but vituperative attack, that the railway becomes misdirected and has therefore to be contended against. One has to justly discriminate between the “abuse” (Wordsworth, 164) of railways and “their legitimate application” (165), yet the latter does not exonerate them from the compromising link with utilitarianism. More dangerous perhaps than the connection with utilitarianism turns out the connection with pleasure and aesthetic experience by which the railway tries to expand its network.

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